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EXPLOSIVE NEW REPORT EXPOSES THE SINGLE LARGEST ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS IN THE STATE'S HISTORY: SAND MINING IN SOUTHEASTERN MASSACHUSETTS

Global sand shortage causing furious rush to mine the region's sand deposits, report identifies regulatory failures, documents air and water pollution, forest and biodiversity and danger to drinking water

Boston, MA (October 19, 2023) - The Community Land and Water Coalition (CLWC), a grassroots network based in Southeastern Massachusetts, today released a first-ever investigative report into sand and gravel mining in Southeastern Massachusetts. The report, Cranberry Country Sand Wars: An investigation into the money, politics and corruption behind sand mining and its silent environmental crisis in Southeastern Massachusetts, is based on a decade of research, hundreds of eyewitness reports, years of drone surveillance and review of thousands of public records. The expose pulls back the curtain on an industry operating in plain sight while polluting the air, [water, wetlands](#), desecrating archeological sites, and exposing the underground drinking water for over 200,000 people to contamination. The report documents that over 2,500 acres have been strip mined, hills leveled, and holes dug into the aquifer to dredge for sand and gravel.

The report can be downloaded and viewed on the interactive website, <https://www.sandwarsseastermma.org/>. A newly released ten minute film accompanies the report and is on the [Save the Pine Barrens, Southeastern Massachusetts YouTube Channel](#).

Southeastern Massachusetts, famous for its approximately 13,000 acres of cranberry bogs, is also home to about 110 mining operations, according to the report. The report links mining to cranberry agriculture and estimates about 71% of the sites are owned by cranberry companies. State laws protect agriculture from overregulation and the report explains that the law can be manipulated to protect sand and gravel mines that claim they are building cranberry bogs or ponds.

The report explains how, why and where this is happening. The volunteer-led effort profiles individual mining locations with details about the size, natural features and other aspects of each, claiming this is an underestimate and that more research is needed.

The report explains that because mining extraction is not regulated under state law and the environmental review statute, the [Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act](#) officials treat mining extraction as a local land use issue, the scope and scale of individual and cumulative environmental damage, including to groundwater, air, wetlands and Indigenous archeology have never been addressed.

The present and future economic toll from environmental damage and lost revenue is enormous, says the report. In March, 2023 the Massachusetts [Office of the Inspector General](#) announced an investigation into financial fraud in the region's sand and gravel industry. This includes the activities of the [Town of Carver Earth Removal Committee](#) according to the Town's Selectboard. The report identifies over 30 mining sites in Carver, many claiming to be cranberry agriculture. In the Town of Wareham, the report documents that the Selectboard allowed A.D. Makepeace Cranberry Co., the world's largest cranberry company headquartered in Wareham, to conduct mining without required permits. The report estimates this [potentially deprived Wareham of \\$650,000.00 in lost revenue](#) from earth removal fees. In Plymouth, the report documents a pattern of the Zoning Board of Appeals [issuing permits to the same mining operators for years](#), for different sites, all claiming the mining was necessary for cranberry agriculture or land development. Drinking water contamination could be caused by the mining, costing the towns billions, according to the report.

"This is the largest, single, preventable and most multi-faceted environmental crisis in the state's history," said Meg Sheehan, a public interest environmental lawyer with over forty years' experience, from Plymouth. "This is complete obliteration and alteration of the environment above and below the ground - some mining operations dig 100 feet deep into the ground according to reports. Above ground, 2,500 acres of the surface of forests have been clear-cut and stripped, including global biodiversity hotspots. Mining takes the land down to bare sand, a sterile moonscape where nothing can grow again in a human timeframe. During the mining operations, residents are exposed to carcinogenic silica sand, noise, vibration, and truck traffic. Below the ground, the aquifer, essentially a river of water, is being exposed to more pollution. Experts say this can lead to more cyanobacteria outbreaks and [change stormwater patterns](#), how rivers flow, and contribute to flooding among other problems."

"Right before our eyes, our environmental and cultural heritage and the [ancestral land of the Wampanoag people](#) is being destroyed - irreversibly. Mining companies, with the complicity of town officials, are allowed to level the region's highest hills making claims that the mining is "necessary" for agriculture or a subdivision. This makes no sense. For decades, we've been seeing a trucks, sometimes one a minute at times fly down local roads to the highways around Plymouth, Carver, Wareham and Middleboro exporting sand and gravel for commercial sale. This is essentially unregulated and unnecessary. There are [alternatives to using sand](#) and Massachusetts needs to catch up with what is happening globally with this issue," said Sheehan. "In the meantime, the extraction must stop and our residents, water, forests and [biodiversity](#) must be protected."

Every resident of the region relies on the [shallow underground aquifer](#) and interconnected ponds for drinking water. The forests, sand and gravel are the natural filtration protection for the drinking water. Sand and gravel mining permanently removes this filtration. Local bylaws passed towns protect communities and drinking water from sand and gravel mining.

"Why are our state and town officials allowing these operations to continue unregulated for years, harming our water and creating public nuisances with dust, noise, vibration and loss of property value? No one has the right to cause this type of pervasive irreversible harm to the public and the environment and present and future residents," said Sheehan.

The United Nations Environment Program recently launched the [Global Sand Observatory Initiative](#) calling "sand resource governance" "one of the greatest sustainability challenges of the 21st century". It calls sand mining a silent environmental crisis and reports sand, gravel and aggregates "are the second most-exploited natural resource in the world after water."

In Massachusetts, the extraction of sand and gravel from the earth is regulated only on the local level as a land use. This puts the power to grant "earth removal permits" into the hands of a few local officials in town halls - the "fox guarding the chicken coop" according to the report. The report documents that for decades, the same local officials with close ties to industry have dominated the permit boards, operating behind a veil of secrecy - until recently. Since the investigation began, four members of the Carver Earth Removal Committee have resigned-three of whom worked in the cranberry and trucking industry that benefit from sand and gravel mining. Mining operators are allowed to self-monitor their activities which creates the potential for depriving taxpayers of earth removal revenue.

Speaking about this threat to Southeastern Massachusetts, the ancestral home of the Wampanoag people for over 15,000 years, Linda Coombs, well known [author](#) and educator from the [Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head \(Aquinnah\)](#) said, "The care of the earth is all of our sacred responsibility - all humans who live on this earth. We need to rethink our societies, and about what it means to be in relationship with the earth, and to NOT think of her as merely a commodity."

"I am very concerned about the destruction of the environment and the effects of the sand mining on our groundwater. It baffles me that Carver's Boards and Committees have allowed, permitted and assisted in the removal of the natural filter for our Sole Source Aquifer, our sand. Who is responsible when the 200,000 people that rely on the [Plymouth/Carver Sole Source Aquifer](#) don't have access to it because of contamination? Is it the predatory companies that are fueled by greed? Is it our State representatives and regulatory departments that have ignored our cries for help and refused to enforce the laws of the Commonwealth? These are the questions that I want answered now that so much sand has been removed from the aquifer" said Mary Dormer, Carver Resident, Co-Founder, Carver Concerned Citizens.

Michael Kellett, Executive Director of the wilderness preservation group [Restore: The North Woods](#) addressed the climate change, biodiversity and forest impacts of this sand and gravel mining. "Clearcutting a forest fuels climate change by releasing large amounts of carbon from the trees and soils - especially on sandy soils such as those in Southeast Massachusetts. Even worse is clearcutting the forest and then mining the sandy soil. This not only releases vast amounts of carbon. The forest, soils, and biodiversity are unlikely to ever be restored to the complex natural systems that exist today."

Major findings include:

- Negative impacts across all environmental media: forests, biodiversity, air pollution, water pollution, wetlands, groundwater, and Indigenous archeological sites, making the problem multi-faceted and pervasive,
- There are at least 110 historic and active mining operations that have:
 - Stripped 2,600 acres of forested land down to bare soil or below and into the aquifer and irreversibly leveled topography;
 - Extracted at least 61 million cubic yards of sand and gravel - at least 2.5 million truckloads, enough to circumnavigate the globe 1.3 times;
- Destroyed vast areas of the globally rare [Atlantic Coastal Pine Barrens](#) forest and the Natural Community ecosystems unique to the region;
- Harmed the public health and well-being by [noise, vibration and emissions of carcinogenic silica sand](#);
- Destroyed evidence of [Native American Indigenous use and occupation](#) of the land without proper review as a result of failures by the Massachusetts Historical Commission

The report calls for a [complete moratorium](#) on the mining and an assessment of the damage to date. It questions whether mining is necessary at all. It calls for a thorough investigation of all operations, all environmental impacts, particularly the impacts of dredging in the aquifer and a review of [financial incentives](#) including tax incentives and [state grants](#) for the cranberry industry, a ["beleaguered industry"](#) and ["dual use"](#) SMART solar subsidies. According to the report, at least two "agricultural ponds" created by mining are approved for "floating solar". It calls for educating municipal officials and calls on the state and federal officials to stop all activities to protect the Plymouth-Carver Sole Source Aquifer.

For more information: www.sandwarsseastermma.org

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